

Missing price tag rings up a gripe

By Roger Boye 195

COIN DEALERS who do not mark the sale price of a coin on the coin holder are an annoyance to a novice collector living in Chicago Heights.

"How am I to tell what the man wants?" she asked in a letter describing a recent coin-buying experience. In one coin shop, she noted that the only markings on the holders were words describing each coin's condition, and seemingly meaningless sets of letters, such as "VCD" or "FWT."

The woman and other concerned collectors should be happy to learn that dealers who do not mark a coin's price on the holder are probably in the minority. These dealers, who are generally willing to tell you the price when asked, say they avoid the time-consuming task of changing the prices when values fluctuate. As one dealer put it, "If we were to mark the prices, we'd spend half an afternoon going through our display cabinet each time the price goes up or down a buck."

Some collectors say they prefer to do business with such dealers because they think those dealers are more willing to haggle over the price. Other collectors, such as the Chicago Heights woman, are much more comfortable seeing the asking price on each item in a display case; so they should obviously patronize dealers who do business in that way.

Incidentally, strange combinations of letters on coin holders are usually a code that tells the dealer how much he or she paid for an item. Since there is no universal code, "VCD" might equate to \$6.50 in one shop or \$475 in another. The codes are not usually terribly sophisticated, and the collector who breaks a code—and thus knows what a dealer paid for the coin—has an obvious advantage when discussing the sale price.

AN OBSERVANT Chicago resident, Daniel Skleney, quarrels with my recent statement that "it is impossible for the United States Mint to produce

a two-headed or two-tailed coin."

"My answer (to a reader's question) would have been 'remotely possible but not probable,'" Skleney writes in a two-page letter. He said that mint employees could "amuse themselves" by secretly altering die holders and then producing a two-headed or two-tailed coin.

Skleney makes a legitimate point, and I should have said "virtually impossible." However, it is still important to remember that apparently no coin-error expert ever has reported seeing an authentic two-headed or two-tailed coin. And the chances of a mint employee clandestinely producing a freak are nil (or, I should say, "almost nil") given the generally rigorous employee supervision system used at the mint today.

ANOTHER READER says, in effect, that I shouldn't criticize people who spell the five-cent coin "nickle" because "Webster's Third International Dictionary of 1963 shows 'nickle' as a variation of 'nickel.'" (A recent column discussed common errors made in articles on numismatic-related subjects.)

The Third International, along with its abridged versions, may be the only dictionary that accepts the "nickle" spelling. Others that I checked (American Heritage, Funk and Wagnalls, Oxford English, Random House, Webster's New World, and World Book, for examples) do not allow the bastard variation.

Interestingly, Webster's Second International also doesn't allow "nickle" as a substitute for "nickel" (it does define "nickle" as "the green wood-pecker"). Editors of the Third International say the dictionary was compiled after an analysis of word usage in millions of examples. Perhaps the editors found the word misspelled so often that they reluctantly yielded to such gross misuse.

Nevertheless, for coin collectors and hopefully for writers, there's only one really acceptable spelling: nickel.